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AUTHOR Morenberg, Max
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ABSTRACT

Though popular in the late 70s and early 80s, the instructional technique of sentence combining attracts little support today, even though practice has proven that teaching the processes of combining and expanding sentences can enhance syntactic maturity. A student writer who is made aware of the expectations of form will be prompted to generate more richly textured content. Despite the suggestion of some critics, there is no necessary antithesis between the process (form) and product (content) approaches to writing instruction. Like the writing-process methodology, the form-based sentence-combining approach is inherently student centered, as it builds upon students' innate knowledge of language. At the same time, the approach gives both teacher and student textual matters to discuss. Properly used, sentence combining can reestablish the relationship between form and content in a writing process class. (SG)

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Process/Schmocess: Why not Combine a Sentence or Two?

Max Morenberg
Miami University

CCCC March 22, 1990

PART 1: MARILYN CALLED. I WAS SURPRISED

It's Marilyn Sternglass from City University of New York, the secretary said, transferring the call to my phone. Would I be willing to write a paper on how sentence combining can be used in a writing process class, Marilyn asked? "Sure," I replied, before thinking through my answer very carefully. It might be fun, I mused, the imp in me chuckling to take on the whole of the academic establishment concerned with the teaching of writing. Anyway, April, 1989, when Marilyn called, seemed pretty far from March of 1990, and I would have a lot of time to think about the subject and write something, eleven months. Probably something about sentence combining as revision, I told her. That was my original idea, anyway. A first draft of a proposal I sent to Marilyn was titled "Sentence Combining and Composition Maintenance: Revision in a Writing Process Class." Academic sounding title. Academic sounding content. Serious business. The proposal was filled with comments about how sentence combining could be used in a writing process class to enrich the teaching of revision. Essentially it claimed that you could use sentence combining practice to stimulate revision within a process-oriented writing class. A title and some direction, form and content, the sort of dreams proposals are typically made on.

Would anyone really care what the paper actually said? After all, sentence combining seems like a dead issue in these days of writing process and freewriting, cubing and brainstorming, students owning their own papers and teacher research, Marxist approaches to composition and deconstructionist approaches to reading. Hardly anybody writes about T-units and cumulative sentences anymore. Coordinate structures and subordinate structures. Participial phrases and nominative ab-

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solutes in student writing and professional writing. Addition, Direction of Modification, Levels of Generality, and Texture. **Anything** concerning syntax and style. Not like in the heady days in the late 70s and early 80s, when articles on sentence combining abounded in the journals—dozens in a year, and lots of dissertations, too. Even a couple of national conferences devoted exclusively to sentence-combining research and pedagogy. There was lots of research going on all over about how sentence-combining practice improves syntactic maturity and writing quality in students from kindergarten to college. It was hot stuff then. Nowadays, you rarely, if ever, see a sentence-combining article in a major journal. And you hardly run into a session on sentence combining at a national conference. This is probably the first one at 4 Cs in many years. When you see the subject mentioned in academic articles nowadays, it's usually in less than flattering terms.

PART 2: MARILYN'S CALL SURPRISED ME

April turned into September, and the acceptance arrived from the Conference on College Composition and Communication, signed by Don McQuade, the program chair. It asked how I wanted the title listed in the program. I'd been stewing over the topic for five months by then, and my impishness had turned to indignation. The mind can do wonderful things in September for a March program. Why wasn't there more emphasis on sentence combining within writing process studies, I thought? Research had shown that sentence combining did in fact improve student writing. Why had everyone forgotten about sentence combining or other methodologies that are concerned with textual matters? I'll show them, the Indignant Other in my mind retorted. Change the title from serious to sarcastic to set the proper mood. How about, "Process/Schmocess: Why not Combine a Sentence or two? Indeed, that's how it was submitted to Don McQuade, and that's how it came out in the program. After I mailed the letter, though, I thought seriously about retrieving it. I

began to think of myself as one of those ancient, hoary professors who, according to Kuhn, try to defend the old paradigm against the bright new one. Was I being as foolish as I remembered some of the old structuralists being after Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* turned linguistics topsy turvy? I hope not. But there's always the chance.

PART 3: I WAS SURPRISED BY MARILYN'S CALL

When sentence combining and the statistical studies that "proved" its efficacy are mentioned at all in contemporary research, it is with less than fondness. Gregory Colomb and Joseph Williams refute the general thrust of a recent Richard Haswell article on quantitative research and writing pedagogy in part by noting that the "sentence combining industry"—akin to the military-industrial complex, no doubt— "was based on" the apparently wrongheaded focus of "looking for statistically significant correlations between formal features of the text and the activities of the writers" (212).

Sharon Crowley is even less generous in her assessment of linguistic approaches to composition in general and sentence combining in particular. In a review of linguistically based composition studies over a thirty-year period, Crowley concludes that the linguistic influence on composition studies from 1950 to 1980 was essentially worthless, since "linguistically based pedagogies" existed in a "cultural vacuum" (499). According to Crowley, these pedagogies were adopted by composition theorists "primarily because of the intellectual poverty that characterized instruction in writing" (499) at the time. If there was a strength, or a possible strength to linguistic approaches, it was that they tried to teach students about their stylistic choices. But if that's a compliment, it's a bit like complimenting the fascists for getting the trains to run on time. One meager, correct thing in an otherwise perverse world. For, in choosing linguistics to teach style, Crowley notes, compositionists had overlooked the

much richer stylistic studies in rhetoric and perhaps had committed graver sins as well.

Sentence combining itself derived from wrongheaded notions, according to Crowley. Chief among these was the notion among Hunt and other researchers that syntactic growth could both be measured and enhanced (490). She acknowledges that sentence combining advocates were able to demonstrate real, if only temporary gains in the quality of writing done by students, thus provoking debate until the end of the seventies (490). But, strangely, even the fact that sentence combining seems to work is irksome, since, says Crowley, "nobody knows precisely why it works. That is, contemporary sentence-combining research has no coherent theoretical base" (490). Another irksome problem, Crowley notes, citing criticism by Moffett and Elbow, is the a-rhetorical nature of sentence combining practice. In all fairness, Crowley's criticisms of sentence combining aren't particularly new or unique; they echo criticisms that were bruited about in the 70s and 80s, and others you'll hear from various quarters today.

I'd like to react to some of these complaints about sentence combining before I show how certain sentence-combining techniques can fit nicely within and perhaps even enhance a process-writing curriculum.

PART 4: WHEN MARILYN CALLED, I WAS SURPRISED

Some of the criticisms are based in fact. There's no doubt the impetus for sentence combining came from studies by Hunt, O'Donnell, Loban, and Christensen that, as Williams notes, tried to find "statistically significant correlations between formal features of the text and the activities of the writers." But I wonder if that was all bad. Certainly the desire of those who searched for statistical correlations was to dispel myths about writing that existed in composition texts. And myths abounded. Don't start sentences with conjunctions. Don't end sentences in prepositions. Use

more sentence variety, which usually meant, start some sentences with participial phrases. Don't use passives. My personal favorite was the advice a ninth-grade English teacher gave my oldest daughter—who was writing sentences filled with the nonrestrictive modifiers Christensen would have loved. "Write shorter sentences; write more like Hemingway," he said, obviously ignorant of the narrative sentences in "Death in the Afternoon." Whether from teachers or textbooks, the advice about writing or language was based on hearsay and lack of information about how writers go about their task and about what it is they finally produce.

The researchers, if they did nothing else, looked at real writing—professional and student writing— before they made claims as to the nature of written language. Christensen found that professional writers, at least those who use a lot of narrative to support their expository topics, do write a large number of cumulative sentences replete with free modifiers. Hunt discovered that there is a direction in which students develop syntactically from fourth to twelfth grade. They don't simply write longer sentences; but they lengthen their sentences by deleting repetitive content and combining what's left into larger structures. Loban, in a thirteen year long diachronic study of over 200 students from kindergarten to grade twelve, confirmed Hunt's findings and showed that better student writers begin using nonrestrictive modifiers and infinitive constructions earlier than weaker student writers and they not only wind up using more of such sophisticated syntactic constructions but in general have a greater control of language structures. According to Loban, "The subjects who rank high on average number of words per communication unit . . . . are capable of simplicity and impressive elaboration" (72). Besides counting syntactic constructions, Loban looked at student records and talked to teachers to confirm his quantitative findings. Loban's study was hardly conducted in a cultural vacuum.

Two major studies of student writing, one synchronic, the other diachronic, one in Oakland, the other in Tallahassee, that, using generative-transformational gram-

mar as an analytic base, drew the same conclusions about syntactic development in the school years: they both concluded that development is a matter of combining and expanding sentences. Surely syntactic growth **could** be measured. But could it be advanced?

It seemed reasonable to think that, if combining and expanding are the natural central processes of syntactic maturity, then syntactic maturity could be enhanced by teaching those processes. And this assumption proved correct in practice. Mellon demonstrated that students made aware of their grammatical options would write longer syntactic structures. O'Hare, by moving sentence combining out of the grammar class into the writing class, demonstrated that students who were encouraged to expand their stylistic repertoire and who produce longer sentences, clauses, and T-units, write better papers as well.

Strong made further advances in sentence combining pedagogy by putting the sentences to be combined into a larger framework of sentences. And from out of this melange of research and pedagogy came the college-level studies Andy Kerek, Don Daiker, and I conducted, with results similar to the earlier ones of Mellon and O'Hare. We found that students write better when they are encouraged to stretch their syntactic muscles. And by the way, we also found that the gains in writing quality are not temporary, as Crowley suggests, but that those gains are retained even two years after students leave the sentence combining class—at least from the first to the third year of college.

Why do students become better writers by practicing sentence combining techniques? No studies I can recall tried to find out why. Anyway, who cared? The fact is that sentence combining works. Sentence combiners are basically pragmatists, I guess, not so much into theory.

But if there was no elaborate theory about why sentence combining works to improve writing, there was at least speculation. That speculation, I think, is summed

up by O'Hare, quoting Christensen; O'Hare suggests that sentence combining helps students to write better because "'solving the problem of *how to say* helps solve the problem of *what to say* . . .'" (75).

PART 5: THE FACT THAT MARILYN CALLED SURPRISED ME

O'Hare citing Christensen. Sentence combining and generative rhetoric always acknowledged a productive relationship between *how to say* and *what to say*. *How* and *What* in this case indicate a recognition both that there is a difference between form and content and that there is an integral relationship between the two at the same time. A student writer who is made aware of the expectations of form will be prompted to generate more richly textured content. Christensen's insight was repeated often in various ways. And Hunt suggests the obverse—that perhaps richer content demands more complex form. For all that he may be accused of emphasizing growth in syntactic complexity for the sake of syntactic complexity, Hunt knew that the longer sentences, clauses, and T-units that adults use indicate more than their ability to write, in some psycholinguistic sense, more complex syntactic structures. In his last major study, published in 1970, Hunt asks a series of questions pertaining to syntactic length and content. "Could it be that the differences in sentence structure between younger and older writers is due in large part to what is said? Could it be that what older writers add is, in some undefined sense, elaborative, peripheral, and subordinate, so that it is this extra subject matter that requires longer clauses and longer T-units?" (54).

In an article entitled "An Apology for Form; or, Who Took the Form Out of the Process?" Richard Coe argues that the Dartmouth conferees who first established the new writing paradigm defined the process approach to composition as antithetical to what they called the product approach. But Coe suggests that this perceived antithesis between process and product created an unbridgeable gap between the two

approaches and ignored the heuristic value of the traditional emphasis on form. According to Coe, the traditional approach—into which Crowley and others have obviously lumped sentence combining— should be termed *formal* instead of *product* because the approach "dichotomized form from content" in answering the question "'what is good writing?'" (14).

Though traditionalists dichotomized form and content, they also realized the productive relationship between the two; the traditionalists saw form as "generative and constraining," notes Coe: "Form is emptiness. But this emptiness creates a desire to find what might fill it . . ." (18). Similarly, D'Angelo had commented that even the patterns of development can "serve a heuristic function," since "They are dynamic organizational processes . . . and not merely conventional static patterns" (56-57).

PART 6: WHAT SURPRISED ME WAS MARILYN'S CALL

Though it is concerned with matters of form, there is nothing in sentence-combining instruction that should be anathema to writing-process instruction. Like writing-process methodology, sentence combining is inherently student centered. Whether it gives students textbook sentences to rework or draws sentences from their own writing, sentence combining pedagogy builds upon students' innate knowledge of language. For instance, a sentence-combining teacher would agree with Murray that the text can talk to the writer and provide clues about how to proceed. But because it is concerned with manipulating the structures of language, sentence combining practice also gives the teacher and student textual matters to discuss, unashamedly.

In order to emphasize the creative nature of grammar, its ability to produce a lot of sentences out of a small amount of material, I give a pair of sentences to my introductory linguistics students to combine into one sentence in as many ways as they

can without changing the essential message. My favorite pair is **It surprised me** and **Jane arrived late**. Most students will take them home and come back to the next class with 50 or 60 versions. The all time winner was one particularly innovative student with some math background who did a factor analysis on the combinations and wound up with 467, stopping he said, not because he couldn't do more, but because after a while the task finally bored him. Quantity not quality is the thrust of this exercise. The concern in a linguistics class is not on the rhetorical effectiveness of any single sentence or even of a series of sentences but on the possibility of producing lots of sentences, and bringing to consciousness what you don't normally think about—your ability to change the form of sentences in may different ways.

Brought into a writing class, that conscious knowledge of your syntactic options could become a revision exercise concerned with quality not quantity. In fact, Kaufer and Steinberg, not themselves sentence combiners, suggest a revision exercise writers can employ as a heuristic to allow them to evaluate the importance of information—what should go into main clauses, what into subordinate structures. The exercise demands that the writer break up her original sentences into kernel sentences then rank the kernels from most important to least important. According to Kaufer and Steinberg, "as information becomes more important [measured by its persistence in the kernels], the need to elaborate it increases; conversely, as information becomes less important, the need to compact it increases" (475) The interaction of form and content.

Such an exercise in deconstruction and reconstruction can also be used to clarify confusing ideas. A friend of mine in Cincinnati who specializes in tax law writes what I consider difficult syntax, filled with abstract nominalizations, perhaps good for carrying on a dialogue with IRS but not very clear for the uninitiated. Here is one of his sentences from an article he recently wrote for the Cincinnati *Enquirer*:

> By increasing its compliance personnel, the IRS expects to generate

> substantial additional net tax revenues by auditing and litigating corporate cases which otherwise would not be pursued.

The two prepositional phrases with gerunds as objects— "by increasing . . ." and "by auditing . . ."— along with the passive relative clause devoid of agency— "which otherwise would not be pursued"—make this a difficult sentence to read. If Howard were one of your students, you could tell him that his sentences were unclear and hope he could figure out how to change them, or you could help him understand how he might have written the sentences in other ways. I can imagine a writing teacher asking Howard to break his sentence into the following seven kernels.

> The IRS is increasing its compliance personnel.
> The IRS expects to generate additional net tax revenues.
> The tax revenues are substantial.
> The tax revenues are additional.
> The IRS will audit corporate cases.
> The IRS will litigate corporate cases.
> The IRS would not otherwise pursue the cases.

Then you might ask him to combine them in several different ways, trying to come up with a less complex, more readable final sentence. If you can make as many as 467 versions from **It surprised me** and **Jane arrived late**, how many might you make from seven? Here are three revisions of the IRS sentence, following Kaufer and Steinberg's suggestions as well as my own sense of style.

> In order to generate additional net tax revenues from corporate cases it would otherwise not audit and litigate, the IRS will increase its compliance personnel.

> By increasing its compliance personnel to audit and litigate corporate cases it would otherwise not pursue, the IRS expects to generate additional net tax revenues—substantial tax revenues.
> Because it will increase its compliance personnel, the IRS will both

audit and litigate corporate cases it would not otherwise pursue— thereby generating significant additional net tax revenues.

Just breaking the sentences into kernels makes certain rhetorical matters apparent. One thing the kernels show is how important the noun"IRS" is as an agent. It occurs as the subject of five of the seven kernels. "IRS" should be emphasized as agent not obscured or deleted. Playing with putting the kernels together in various ways can expose weaknesses in logic or vocabulary as well as what should be emphasized as the central focus. I couldn't for instance figure a pleasing way to put the two adjectives "additional" and "substantial" together. In my first revision, I left out "substantial," then I put it into a repetitive appositive, and finally I changed it to "significant," which seems to pair better with "additional." Which version you finally choose will be determined by a number of factors, including how well you like an individual syntactic variant and by the context which the sentence has to fit into, the sentences that precede and follow it.

PART 7: IT WAS THE CALL FROM MARILYN THAT SURPRISED ME

My dad told me there are no free lunches. I tell my son there's no free writing. In a paper at a long ago research conference in Texas, Andy Kerek noted that even so-called free modifiers are useless to the writer unless the ability to exploit them is "tamed, bridled, defused, [and] delimited," (106); according to Kerek, "the trick for the writer is learning to decide when to expand and when not to expand, and when the decision to expand is made then having the syntactic know-how to implement that decision" (106-107). Just as sentence-combining practice can give the revising writer choices, it can give the composing writer the means to generate ideas.

Students who practice the revising exercises explained above, the whole-discourse sentence-combining exercises developed originally by Strong, as well as the imitation exercises recommended by Christensen gain the kind of control of lan-

the relationship between the structure of their text and their ideas.

In a review of Tom Newkirk's *More than Stories*, Tom Romano relates how "Newkirk argues that the now traditional and ubiquitous concept of 'process' is an inadequate philosophical basis for a writing approach. [Newkirk] notes how fervent writing process teaching has created 'either/or' thinking. Key terms have been dangerously thrown into polarization. Dogma prowls many classrooms" (87). Newkirk deplores the fact that writing classes are either process oriented or product oriented. And he further states, according to Romano, "'There is no choice between product and process. We must choose both and attempt to describe their complex relationship'" (87). Perhaps by incorporating sentence combining in writing process classes, we can begin to teach both product and process. Sentence combining, properly used, can re-establish the relationship between form and content in a writing process class.

PART 8: MARILYN'S CALL, THOUGH A SURPRISE, STARTED ME THINKING

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